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SUBJECT: BASHAR'S USES ROAD TRIP FOR POSITIVE PR, MORE
TRAVEL COMING

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin for reasons 1.4 (b and d).

¶1. (C) Summary: President Asad used a three-day Gulf trip to attract regional and international press attention to Syria's desire for progress on the Golan track and better relations with Saudi Arabia. Our sources say Asad's upcoming swing through North Africa next week (starting with Rabat, Algiers, Tunis and ending with a possible ad hoc Arab summit in Tripoli) will provide more of the same. Bashar's June visit to India will include a large trade delegation to discuss expanding bilateral economic ties, and our contacts are also talking about a possible trip by Bashar to South Africa sometime this summer. While Bashar has made no official decision regarding French President Sarkozy's invitation to attend the July 13 Mediterranean Union summit, Claude Gueant and Jean-David Levitte will be in Damascus soon, according to the French Embassy here. Bashar is reported to have decided on a visit to Beirut, but security and other factors have left the timing uncertain. These high-visibility trips are attempts to solidify his standing at home and provide an international platform to promote an moderate image of Syria. End Summary.

Bashar's Trip to the Gulf Judged a Success

¶2. (C) Back from his swing through the UAE and Kuwait, Bashar is ready for more travel. Al Hayat Bureau Chief Ibrahim Hamidi reports the President's delegation returned to Damascus "overjoyed" by Bashar's success in dealing with Lebanon, the Golan track, and even the U.S. allegations of Syrian-North Korean nuclear cooperation. Hamidi pointed to the exceptionally positive press coverage Bashar received in the UAE and Kuwait, noting "this has convinced the SARG it can use Bashar's travels to paint a more positive image of Syria abroad." Bashar pressed for more direct investment in Syria from Kuwait and the UAE. Hamidi said Bashar would attempt to build on this momentum during proposed upcoming travel to Rabat, Tunis, Algiers, and Libya (where Qadhafi is still rumored to be organizing an ad hoc Arab summit to coincide with Bashar's visit.) Bashar will also go to New Delhi June 16-17, and the Indian Ambassador told Charge the trip would be "protocolary" in nature. As-Safir

correspondent Ziad Haydar, who is covering the trip, told us the trip to India will include a large trade delegation and a heavy press contingent.

13. (C) The regime hopes to use positive coverage of Bashar's trip to the Gulf to strengthen his image at home and informally challenge other Arab states to respond to Syria's opening. Imad Shweibi, a staunch regime hack who maintains close ties to the security services, told us (and others) that Asad performed "brilliantly" in playing up Syria's desire to play a constructive role in the region. According to Shweibi "We solved Lebanon after the U.S., Egypt and Saudi Arabia prolonged the crisis by emboldening March 14," Syria had "demonstrated its desire for regional stability by pursuing indirect talks with Israel," and it was even cooperating with the IAEA's request to receive inspectors in Syria. According to Shweibi, Bashar's willingness to travel to Beirut and open a Syrian Embassy was a clear sign that Syria was ready to move forward. "We've met all your concerns and we're waiting for you (the U.S.) to respond."

14. (C) Shweibi's hyperbole aside, Bashar sought rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and Egypt on the Arab agenda. "Bashar's trip puts the Arab world in a difficult position," assessed an Egyptian Embassy contact. "He's seen by the Arab people as actively engaging the region, working for peace, while we and the Saudis are still perceived as trying to block his access." Cairo was still holding firm, as evinced by President Mubarak's assurances to Saudi King Abdullah in Jeddah and Cairo's continued refusal to send any Ministerial level visitors to Damascus (according to the Egyptian Ambassador). Nonetheless, Syrians close to the regime (like Shweibi) were pushing for more GOE contacts with the SARG. "The Syrians are accusing us of being Saudi stooges," he said. Many Egyptians were apt to feel a "natural desire" to play a leadership role in the region. Bashar's slated travel next week to North Africa (and a possible ad hoc summit of Arab leaders organized by Qadhafi) would increase calls for Egypt to "do something. Perhaps not directly, and probably not at a high level," but the opening is "getting wider." President Mubarak had reportedly been invited but had made no decision on whether to attend the Arab leader meeting in Tripoli, according to our source.

And the French?

15. (C) Regarding Bashar's upcoming travel to Paris, our French Embassy colleagues could not share much. The French DCM told us that Presidential advisors Claude Gueant and Jean-David Levitte would be visiting Damascus as soon as their schedules would permit and that the Elysee was taking the lead on Syria policy. Syrian sources say that Bashar has not formally responded but is widely believed to be inclined to go to Paris in July. Hamidi told us that Syria still has a few objections to the Mediterranean Union format, but that these will likely be ironed out in the next two weeks. His Foreign Ministry contacts are viewing the Paris event as a venue to open bilateral relations with France ("obviously") and a possible "confidence building step" that could include the seating of Israeli PM Olmert and Bashar in the same room. Hamidi told us that Gueant and Levitte were due in Damascus to discuss Asad's trip to Paris and details of the "Mediterranean and Programme" to be addressed at a preparatory meeting by Mediterranean and European experts next week.

Recent UK Visits

16. (C) While Bashar was in the Gulf, UK Ministry of Foreign Affairs Permanent U/S Peter Ricketts (described by British Ambassador Simon Collis as "the equivalent to your Director General") arrived June 3 and will meet Deputy FM Faysal Mekdad. British Embassy contacts state this visit is a routine trip to discuss administrative issues, such as

construction of the new British Embassy.

17. (C) The Ricketts visit comes on the heels of a stop in Damascus by two British parliamentarians last week, with whom Bashar did meet on May 27. At a June 2 Italian National Day reception, Collis told us and other diplomats that the visiting British MPs raised Syria's indirect talks with Israel on the Golan and asked Bashar for a reaction to demands by Israeli FM Livni that Syria give up relations with Iran, Hizballah, and Hamas as a condition of a peace deal. Bashar responded that Iran was a state, and Syria maintained relations with it as it did with other states. It would be inappropriate for Israel to demand an end to those relations, just as it would be inappropriate for Syria to demand Israel end relations with the U.S. Regarding Hizballah, Bashar maintained that the group was impossible to separate from Lebanon's broader political context. Israeli efforts to defeat Hizballah militarily had failed and western confrontation of the group had strengthened it. Bashar advocated establishing a Lebanon-Israeli track parallel with the Golan track. This option would allow for a solution to territorial disputes between Israel on the one hand and Lebanon and Syria on the other. It would also provide the necessary impetus for Lebanese actors to resolve the issue of Hizballah's arms via consensus. Bashar suggested that Syria's relationship to Hamas was different, in that peace between Syria and Israel might result in lowering of Hamas, profile in Syria but such a deal would not reduce Hamas, relevance to its presence in the West Bank and Gaza.

18. (C) Comment: The positive atmospherics generated by the Doha accord and the continuation of Turkish-brokered indirect talks with Israel on the Golan have provided Bashar a pretext to wage a campaign for ending Syria's isolation. We seriously doubt the SARG has changed its spots and we will continue to look for signs as to how Bashar plans to use his travels to serve his long term goals.

CORBIN